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SPAGHETTI OR PASTA, IT'S ALL THE SAME TO ME

When I visit Dino in Amsterdam, I like to look at a chart that he has in his kitchen that gives a visual of each kind of pasta that is made today in Italia. There are probably about twenty-five or so kinds of pasta on the chart. Most Italians here in Italy seem to know the difference between them, not only how they are shaped, but how they are made. Not all pastas have the same ingredients.

When they hear that I am American, most people I've met have something nice to say about the U.S. but eventually they all get around to noting that most Americans call all the various types of pasta "spaghetti" or just plain "pasta" and never note the name of the specific pasta such "linguine" (although this has become better known to Americans than most other "spaghettis.")

I am guilty of the same offense and the Italians find extremely humorous the fact that I can only name five or six types of pasta! I did, however, find out something about pasta that I never knew.

Our grandfather, our Nonno, only had pasta on three or four days a year. Remember it is only in recent historical memory that pasta was made in factories and sold in supermarkets. Even the most basic pasta was expensive to make, it had to be made by hand, and our great grandmother, Angela Ciavarella, had neither the time or the money to make a pasta meal except for Christmas, Easter, the Feast of the Assumption, and sometimes on the birthday of each child.

I learned this from Dr. Luigi Vocino who is the son of Nonno's youngest brother, Vincenzo. Gino, as Luigi is called, was named after Papanon. Gino relayed this information about pasta and Papanon to me after he heard a conversation between two of my neighbors and me. They were asking if I ever had a dish called "panicotto." I said, "No." They were all surprised, and Gino expressed horror. He said that it was Papanon's favorite dish. He invited me immediately to have pranzo the next day with his sister and brother. His sister, Angela made the dish.

It consists of hard bread, boiled in water with mostly potatoes, along with a green of some kind, carrots, and virtually any other vegetable available. Drained, the

concoction is served in a soup bowl and covered in a little pepperoncino, a little salt and olive oil. It was my favorite dish during this stay in Italy!

Gino said that when Nonno visited Italy, it was his favorite dish and whenever he was asked what he wanted to eat, he said “panicotto.” It is a truly peasant dish. Gino said it is probably what Nonno had to eat every day of his life while in Sannicandro as a boy except for those special days on which Papanon’s mother made pasta or served a small portion of meat with the panicotto.

To my great surprise, potatoes rather than pasta were the staple of the diet for peasant and poor Italians like Papanon who lived in the Mezzogiorno and in towns and villages like Sannicandro Garganico. Italians used the potato as their basic food just as the peasants in Ireland did.

So, those of you who think Italians were raised on great pasta dishes, you are wrong. During Nonno and Nonna’s days as young people in Italy, they ate mostly vegetables and the hardiest of those vegetables, the easiest to grow, and best to store, not to mention also the most popular, was the potato. In fact, potatoes are still served by our relatives and frequently. They cook them in a variety of ways and spice them up with all kinds of great culinary inventions, but underneath is the grand old potato.

michael vocino
Sannicandro Gco.
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